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Op Ed: Congress Must Support WV Farmers; Ratify USMCA

In a global economy, trade is king and often the center-piece of international disagreements between nations. Because strength is often tied to a nation's ability to export goods, trade agreements can either bond countries together or act as the catalyst for war. Nowhere is this more evident than in the United States, as capitalism combined with globalization gave rise to the America we know today. Over the years, these same forces changed our nation's economy from a manufacturing powerhouse to one more focused on services and technology. However, throughout America's history, one thing has remained a constant, powerful force; Agriculture.

American farmers continue to feed the world as they have since our nation's humble beginnings. Even with a workforce that has been cut in half in the last twenty-years, the United States and its farmers continue to show our agricultural might is not disappearing anytime soon. Of course, this strength does not come without its drawbacks, as our farmers are a prime target for foreign nations. For other countries and their farmers to compete, they must create an uneven playing field. This means shutting out American farmers from their markets or slapping hefty tariffs on US agricultural goods. As a result, our farmers must either find other consumers or see profit margins shrink.

These punitive practices have gone on for too long. Congress must join President Donald Trump and stand up for the hardest working people in our country. First Congress must ratify the United States-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) trade agreement, as negotiated by our President. Having a unified North America working together can only benefit, as well as increase the United States leverage on trade negotiations with China and the European Union. Frankly, if we cannot find common ground with our neighbors, how are we supposed to reach agreements with the rest of the world?

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Ratifying trade agreements like the USMCA will have a tremendous impact even on small states like West Virginia. The Mountain State alone exports \$1.7 billion worth of products to Mexico and Canada annually. If the USMCA agreement became law, it would mean new markets for many of our farmers including dairy, livestock and poultry operations. The dairy industry is a prime example of an industry that is in desperate need of a boost. West Virginia dairy operations have shrunk to only 60 producers state-wide. Ratifying the agreement will bring a much-needed economic opportunity to an industry struggling to stay alive in West Virginia.

Livestock and poultry make up 80 percent of West Virginia's agricultural production. Most ship their products right here in the United States, mainly because past trade agreements have made it impossible to compete with the prices coming out of Mexico. With new trade agreements, West Virginia farmers will benefit when highly sought-after genetics are made available to a greater audience. West Virginia must focus on quality over quantity. That will only work if our specialty products can be shipped across the globe to customers willing to pay premium prices.

West Virginia farmers, as well as all the rest of the hard-working men and women who grow our food in the United States, are proud people. They do not ask for a lot, just the ability to sell what they grow at a sustainable price. The President's efforts to level the playing field are a welcome change from administrations' past and its time Congress shows the same support to our farmers by ratifying the USMCA agreement. We can no longer allow foreign nations to use the American farmer as a trade pawn. The farming community has waited long enough.

Kent A. Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

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